

PROFESSIONAL FORUM



Auftragstaktik Its Origin and Development

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Since FM 100-5, Operations, was published in August 1982, the U.S. Army has made much of the mission order and mission-oriented command. In fact, we seem to have elevated the mission order to the level of a quasi-sacrament and have almost made it an end in itself.

In the absence of a clear understanding of the context in which the mission order developed, we may see its adoption as the single solution to our perceived command and control problems. In doing so, we may believe we are using mission-oriented command when we are really using only the mission order. If this is the case, we will have adopted the form while ignoring the substance.

Mission-oriented command, or what the Germans call *Auftragstaktik*, is a decentralized leadership and command philosophy that demands decisions and action at the lowest level of command where there is an intimate knowledge of the situation and the commander's intention in beginning an operation. (See also "*Auftragstaktik*," by Captain Frank A. Kerkemeyer, INFANTRY, November-December 1987, pages 28-30.) The mission order is merely a technique that is used to implement and execute mission-oriented command.

Mission-oriented command is based on a belief in the ability of an individual's creative action to solve a problem without recourse to higher authority; the mission order is only the small component of mission-oriented command that we see in the field. But there are other components of mission-oriented command that must also work before an army takes the field:

- Mutual trust among leaders based on each leader's intimate personal knowledge of the capabilities of the others.
- Training and organization in everything the army does to reinforce the primacy of the judgment of the man on the scene (decentralization).
- A willingness to act on the part of all leaders and those who aspire to be leaders.
- Simple, commonly accepted and understood operations concepts.

The success of the AirLand Battle concept depends on the initiative of our junior leaders to act in the spirit of their commander's intent in the absence of orders. The only historically proved method of giving subordinates the freedom to act on their own is mission-oriented command. This concept cannot be adopted, however, by simple doctrinal

decree.

If we unthinkingly rush to impose mission orders upon ourselves without fully understanding the whole of mission-oriented command, we risk adding more confusion to an already chaotic environment. When used out of its proper context, the mission order alone is not mission-oriented command and creates more problems than it solves.

The German Army of 1800 to 1945 is widely believed to be the most consistently successful modern army at using mission-oriented command. The following brief outline of its development and components may broaden our understanding of *Auftragstaktik* as an organic whole.

With the advent of Napoleonic open-order tactics, the Germans saw a need to take advantage of the potential for individual creativity at every level to solve common military problems, instead of relying on the native brilliance of one individual in command to solve all problems.

They were quick to realize that almost every man in a battle could contribute more than just his physical prowess. They were among the first to institutionalize the harnessing of collective

creativity within a generally accepted pattern (doctrine) of military action.

Mission-oriented command, as practiced by the German Army, accepted a lack of absolute control over events on the battlefield. Instead of trying to dictate the actions of each subordinate, the Germans realized that there was much more profit in trying to ensure that, when the need arose, their subordinates would act without waiting for orders.

The Germans believed that it was better to know that each man would act on his own to contribute *something* than to have him wait for orders to do the "right" thing. The idea of the commander's intent as a normal part of the mission statement was important, of course, because it provided a framework within which an isolated subordinate could act in the spirit of that mission.

As a corollary to the notion of the commander's intent, the German Army established a simple conceptual framework that provided a common basis for action in the absence of orders. This framework was based on the idea that a successful defense depended on the rapid destruction of an enemy army through maneuver so the defenders could turn and face other potentially aggressive armies. The German military leaders believed that offensive maneuver offered the best chance to shock and dislocate an enemy force so it could be destroyed at the least cost to them. It became the preferred German method of war, even within a defensive strategy, and a staple in the German military tradition.

PREJUDICE

The Germans' approach clearly reflected their prejudice that there was more art than science to battlefield operations. They accepted that battle is marked by confusion and ambiguity and consciously traded an assurance of control for an assurance of self-induced action on the part of subordinates. They apparently embraced the confusion of battle as an unending source of potential opportunity and built a command and control philosophy in which that potential could be realized through decentralized decision making. They seem to have faced and

solved the extraordinarily difficult problem of motivating men to take independent action in the midst of battle without orders or supervision.

Over the course of about 150 years, they developed a professional tradition that was founded on a belief in the ability of the man on the spot to act—within this broad but well understood and accepted conceptual framework—to solve the many tactical and operational problems that face an army in action. And then they acted on that belief by institutionalizing the concept.

EDUCATION

Critically important to this institutionalization of *Auftragstaktik* in the German Army was the superior military education offered to selected officers in the *Kriegsakademie*. The academy originated with the officer education reform activities of Prussian general Gerhard Johann David von Scharnhorst at the start of the 19th Century. It was an effort to raise the level of military and liberal arts education for regimental and staff officers.

The academy was somewhat exclusive, initially, because the faculty and the facilities were limited. Later, though, this exclusive nature was maintained by design, because an applicant had to have his regimental commander's specific recommendation and had to undergo an exhausting, competitive entry examination.

Before he could graduate, he had to receive a favorable faculty recommendation (based on the continual evaluation of each student's creativity, objectivity, and mental stamina, as well as course grades) and to complete a comprehensive series of written and oral examinations. The graduate also had to serve a one-year apprenticeship with the General Staff before he could become a permanent member. Appointment to the General Staff was not automatic—the apprentice-officer had to earn it.

Officers who failed to graduate stayed at the Academy to complete the same military education as the graduates, and they took their skills back to their regiments to teach others. There was no

stigma attached to not being selected for General Staff duty, and no thought seems to have been given to relaxing the demanding studies and tough evaluations simply for the sake of turning out more graduates. If his performance of duty in the regiment was consistently outstanding, an officer who had completed the Academy but had not been selected for an apprenticeship could be called later to join the General Staff and to serve that apprenticeship.

As mentioned above, the basic German concept was simple: Maneuver to shock the enemy in order to destroy him. If a junior NCO or officer acted in some way to do this, he was always "right." This conceptual framework was promulgated throughout the army in the General Staff training, in professional journals, and in all unit training.

The unit commander was charged to an extraordinary degree with the training, education, and development of his juniors. (Until fairly recently, in fact, there were few schools in the German Army, and the personnel system was highly decentralized.) This decentralization was merely a natural extension and reinforcement of decentralized decision making.

INEXCUSABLE

Because German doctrine was regulatory, therefore, a subordinate's failure to act in the absence of orders was "illegal" and, at the very least, inexcusable in the eyes of his superiors and peers. An NCO or officer knew he was expected to act on the situation as he saw it, and he knew his action would be supported. As a result, action in the face of uncertainty and responsibility for that action was developed into a social norm.

Trust between superior and subordinate was the cornerstone of mission-oriented command. The superior trusted his subordinate to exercise his judgment and creativity and to act as the situation dictated to reach a specified goal. And the subordinate trusted that his superior would support whatever action he took in good faith to contribute to the good of the whole.



German machinegunners, Italy, 1944.

The superior's level of confidence in his subordinates could be high or low as a result of the intimate knowledge he had gained through his personal responsibility for their training and development. He knew which of them could be trusted to execute a mission on the basis of broad orders and which needed more detailed instructions. But he knew that each would act.

The subordinate was willing to exercise his judgment during periods of great stress with no additional instructions once the action started. The superior constantly nurtured this willingness by allowing for mistakes of detail or method and by permitting errors of judgment during training.

The idea that "everything short of war is training" was held to be valid: Every action taken by an officer in the field or in garrison was important to the process of inculcating a preference for solutions. If a subordinate erred while acting in good faith, he did not suffer anything more than corrective coaching. His solution might be constructively critiqued, but the result of his action—and the reason he took that action—were con-

sidered far more important.

The role of corrective advice was to teach and coach the subordinate so that his future action would make a more positive contribution to the unit's success in combat. This idea was based on the premise that one learned more from a well-meaning mistake that was constructively critiqued than from a mediocre performance that was hardly noticed.

Initially, the superior was not so much concerned with what a subordinate did or how he did it. Rather, his emphasis was on seeing that his subordinate gained and then maintained an instinctive willingness to act and that he analyzed why he acted as he did and the effect his action had on the overall operation. Hearing the subordinate's view of his reasons for a certain course of action helped the superior evaluate the adequacy of his own original communication of the mission and his intention.

The German Army's training system used two very simple criteria to judge whether the junior leader did well: the timeliness of his decision and his own justification for it. The first criterion impressed him with the need to act quickly

while the second required him to reflect on his action and gain insight into his own thought process. Since he had to justify the decision in his own mind before implementing it, imprudent decisions and rash actions were less likely. In training, what he decided to do was relatively unimportant. The emphasis was on the effect of his action on the whole, not on the method he may have chosen. In an environment where there were no formulas, this technique solicited creative solutions.

Through mission orders, therefore, mission-oriented command brought the collective creativity of subordinates into the decision and action processes. The subordinate had a personal stake in the outcome of battle, because he knew he contributed to it intellectually and independently.

Mission-oriented command was based on the idea that undue criticism, after the fact, of the man on the scene—who was in a confused, dangerous, and pressured situation and who had the best command of immediate information—was unwarranted. Anything beyond a constructive critique would only destroy the subor-

dinate's willingness to act and might even lead him to withhold adverse information or provide falsely optimistic reports simply to avoid his superior's wrath. This idea recognized there was little in mission-oriented command that was "systematic" and made allowances for this.

In mission-oriented command, both superior and subordinate shared the burden of mission accomplishment. Of course, the greater burden obviously rested with the superior, because he had to teach, trust, support, and correct well-intentioned but possibly errant actions. The subordinate was required to report accurately and to act when the situation demanded it. Inaction, not "wrong" action, was the cardinal sin.

The heart and soul of *Auftragstaktik* was the desired result, not the way the result was achieved. It rejected as counter-productive any attempt to control the type of action initiated during combat. It concentrated instead on instilling in subordinates the will to act as they deemed appropriate in their situations to attain the desired result.

The cultivation of initiative required special effort. It was so central to mission-oriented command that it applied to squad leaders as well as to division or corps commanders. A leader had to make a truly gross error to be reprimanded, and

then the reprimand would not forever haunt him throughout his service or unduly penalize him for an honest mistake.

In brief, the function of mission-oriented command was to bring the collective creativity of an army to bear in solving tactical problems. It rewarded the soldier who acted and penalized the one who did not. The mission order, the battlefield technique through which mission-oriented command was practiced, included the mission's objectives and a clear articulation of the commander's intent. The order not only left the subordinate free to determine how to complete his mission but also relied on him to decide on new courses of action as events unfolded that altered the assumptions made in planning.

Auftragstaktik was a product of German social and cultural tradition, and it was adapted by the German Army for its purposes. It depended on a relatively simple but well understood and accepted operational concept to generally guide commanders in deciding how to accomplish their missions. It demanded—and provided—adequate training and education both in the *Kriegsakademie* and in the units to make its execution reliably sure. It recognized and compensated for differences in the temperament and ability of its officers and NCOs through personalized unit training and professional

development, and in the details each was given in orders in the field. It provided a gigantic support structure to infuse and sustain the subordinates' initiative in battle.

This concept worked so well, however, that we in the U.S. Army now idolize it without fully comprehending the totality of what it was, why or how it developed, or how it worked as a system.

We must understand that issuing mission orders is not practicing mission-oriented command. To use this command concept successfully, subordinate leaders must be adequately prepared for it, and the entire organization of an army must be prepared to support, sustain, and reinforce it.

Our AirLand Battle doctrine is right in demanding that decentralized decisions be made by the man on the spot. Our challenge is to find a method of decentralized decision making that fits our culture and our Army.

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Improving The Staff Planning Process

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The primary mission of the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin is to observe, control, and train battalion task forces in continuous tactical operations against an opposing force (OPFOR)

motorized rifle regiment that uses Soviet tactics. One of the greatest challenges facing an armored task force at the NTC is the staff planning process.

To succeed in the NTC's intense desert

environment, a task force staff must be able to plan, support, and supervise movement over extended distances and for extended lengths of time, and react to rapid changes in the essential informa-